



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commission on Children



Testimony of
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Select Committee on Children
Connecticut General Assembly
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Representative Urban and members of the Select Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Connecticut Commission on Children in support of several bills before this committee regarding youth violence, family supports and particular bills that will help families during this recession.

Violence Prevention

We are burying children in smaller and smaller coffins. The Connecticut news reports shootings and death of young teens routinely. The Commission on Children strongly supports Proposed Bill 5816 to study youth violence. We need the best minds in the state working together on this issue. I would recommend the addition to the task force of the Department of Public Safety – which includes the State Police – and the Chief State's Attorney's Office. It is important to have law enforcement and prosecutors involved in this effort. Our agency is glad also to participate and to link the work of other states such as Fight Crime, Invest in Kids.

The work of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids offers a strong national example on which the state task force could build. This organization of more than 5,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, attorneys general, other law enforcement leaders and violence survivors has produced strong evidence that early investment in children is a key component in crime prevention.

Fight Crime identifies four key steps proven to prevent crime: high-quality early care and education, voluntary parent coaching to at-risk parents through home visiting and other programs, effective in-school and after school programs, and proven interventions for troubled adolescents and their families.

The Recession and Family Life

The recession before us has shown a dramatic rise in unemployment, domestic violence, and family stress. Dr. Kenneth Land from Duke University reported that virtually all the progress made in children's economic well-being since 1975 is likely to be wiped out by the downturn.

Already, the evidence is staggering. Here in Connecticut, more children are hungry, homeless, and living in families under tremendous stress. Fully 28 percent of the state's children have parents with no full-time, year-round employment. Home foreclosures have pushed many families into the rental market, which in turn is driving up rents — despite falling incomes and rising unemployment. As a result, many families won't find housing at all. In just one year Connecticut homeless shelters reported a 30 percent increase in the number of families they had to turn away due to lack of space.

What we do now will influence a near decade for children. Thus any policies that bolster the supports that families need right now are paramount. They need to buffer against unemployment and homelessness and to help children and youth remain on a trajectory for success as adults.

Parents cannot get out of unemployment or homelessness, without childcare. They should be part of the Care 4 Kids program as Care 4 Kids is intended for those most in need of care in order to work. **H.B. 5293, An Act Extending the "Care 4 Kids" Program to Families with a Parent who is Actively Seeking Employment** will help parents work and children thrive.

Many youth are running away due to extreme family stress and/or to simply help out the family budget by decreasing costs in a household. Many low income youth are not able to attend college or stay in college. This is both due to cost as well as needing to help out other family members who have lost their jobs and to care for the younger children and elders in families. Other youth are simply forgotten because they are adopted or living with kin. Proposed bills **H.B. 5120, An Act Concerning Educational Financial Assistance for Children Adopted Through the Department of Children and Families** and proposed **S.B. 135, An Act Concerning Postsecondary Educational Financial Assistance for Children in Kinship Care** recognize the youth who are not with their biological families of origin, but are nonetheless with their families and need support for college.

The recession is increasing family stressors which impact children. At the extreme, this includes violence, substance abuse and crime. Two bills before this committee ensure taking action if a child is in a car with someone drinking and through serious mental health intervention if a youth abuses animals. Research informs us that if you harm an animal, you are likely to next harm a human. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence conducted a study in which 85 percent of women and 63 percent of children reported incidents of pet abuse in their families after arriving at domestic violence shelters.

Getting the help that is needed to address the mental health needs of these young people is a smart way to prevent future, predictable violence. Thus the Commission supports both Proposed **S.B. 746, An Act Requiring an Investigation by the Department of Children and Families When a Person is Arrested for Drunken Driving with a Child in the Vehicle** and Raised **H.B. 5814, An Act Concerning Children and Cruelty to Animals**

With limited resources and a growing debt, Connecticut must ensure that we invest in children wisely and that our policies and programs promote the outcomes we are looking for. We have no time for failure and guess work. Thus we support **Raised H.B. 6282, An Act Requiring an**

Annual Results-Based Accountability Report Card Evaluating State Policies and Programs Impacting Children

The Commission on Children would be honored to work with the Select Committee on Children, the Office of Legislative Research and the Office of Fiscal Analysis on an annual report card on child outcomes. We have been releasing a social health index for 16 years. The Index, brought into statute as Public Act No. 97-312, was developed by our agency with then-Senate President Pro Tempore John Larson.

The Social State of Connecticut is an index of social, economic and health areas that impact children, the family and our work life. No single issue or agency dominates. It spans generations and regions of the state. Three decades are graphed to highlight patterns of success or challenge within eleven social health areas. Each indicator is traced over thirty, ten and five years to show us long as well as short term gains or losses. A single number averages these eleven indicators together.

The child indicators include infant mortality, child abuse, youth suicide, high school dropouts and teen births. The adult indicators include unemployment, average weekly wages and health insurance. Thus some of the indicators referenced in H.B. 6282 are included in the Index (child abuse, child poverty, low birth-weight). In 2008, we also looked at Young People and the Law with a three year comparison and overall trends in juvenile arrests.

Family Ties in Loss and War

The Commission also supports **H.B. 5503, An Act Concerning the Priority of Grandparents in Child Custody Cases and Raised H.B. 6281, and An Act Concerning Visitation Rights by Grandparents Both H.B. 6281 and 5503** recognize grandparents are part of the heart and architecture of the family.

Of most importance to children in any shift in family structure are stability and the constancy of parental love. Parents take priority over grandparents in both constitutional rights and the ego development and long-term developmental needs of the child or youth.

However, grandparents are sometimes ignored when a divorce, death, drug addiction or criminal conviction occur. The omission of the grandparent at this point is all the more detrimental to the child as there has already been one loss of a parent, temporary or not. Children suffer when they lose the intergenerational connection with grandparents if they have had a true and deep relationship with the grandmother or grandfather. When a child loses a grandparent during a death of a parent, criminal conviction, drug or alcohol abuse, or divorce—simply because the other parent or adults involved neglect to bring in the elder, this harms the child.

Sometimes the parent responsible for the child is just not thinking straight due to the crisis or change in life. Sometimes the parent is ‘acting out’ to expunge the memory of the lost or disconnected partner. This harms the child. In other cases, it is an agency with authority that ignores the grandparent. This also harms the child.

I have had opportunity to work with the military on this issue at NCSL and wish to inform you that many soldiers overseas are heartened to know that their parents are able to visit their children, while they are at war. This is true even if the marriage is no longer intact. Yet, in many cases, a new marriage has kept the paternal grandparents away from the children. The military has established a group to seek to address this domestic policy. When at war and concerned about your own mortality, you have comfort knowing your parents will nurture your children in your absence.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on these bills.